

Reinvigorating Curriculum Design

Case Study



Project title: Improving business performance

This project has focused on the design and delivery of technical certificate and diploma qualifications for the Fibreboard and Wood sectors. Working in partnership with employers, the qualifications are designed to improve business performance by developing the performance management skills of supervisors and managers and providing technical certification for apprentices.

Worth reading if you are interested in:

- Employer-led training programmes to improve business performance
- Course design
- Partnership working with an employer

Contact information

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What the project set out to do and why

The project set out to achieve three key objectives:

1. Design and pilot a cost-effective, employer-led training programme with business organisations within the Fibreboard and Wood sector.
2. Accredit a university-approved, technical certificate and diploma programme that provides progression routes for employees within these sectors and includes apprenticeships for the 16+ age group.
3. Disseminate the programme to all employers in the sector via the Sector Skills Councils and their professional bodies.

The team at Vision West Nottinghamshire College focused on the development of the curriculum with the Fibreboard and Wood sector for the following reasons:

- To engage with employers having no track record of using higher education in

the development of their employees. In particular, the Fibrewood and Wood sector has a history of traditional recruitment practices and are now facing the challenges of an ageing workforce and poor retention of people new to the industry.

- To work in partnership with an employer to provide a tailored, co-funded training package that directly targeted business performance. Two key benefits of the certificate and diploma training programme have been to use the increasingly multi-skilled workforce more effectively through skill-sharing and to enable all staff to increase their knowledge of the company as a whole to create a greater integration of work sites.
- To take a first step in creating an environment where supervisors and operators develop mentoring skills to support the development of a younger workforce and to increase ownership of their own, and others', performance.
- To challenge current delivery models, and change the perception of further education that some industries have.
- To establish cost-effective solutions that allow delivery to take place on multiple sites across the country.

In the long term, the project intends to:

- develop a culture for sharing of practice across multiple sites'
- recognise and meet skills gaps in the current workforce and utilise business improvement tools to develop the overall performance of companies in the sector;
- introduce a young, skilled workforce to the organisations;
- build an appetite across the sector for continuous improvement;
- forge links into higher education which will lead to the development of foundation degrees and, eventually, a top-up degree.

In the short term, the project intends to:

- create alignment with the business organisations, the skills sector council (Pro Skills) and awarding bodies for the content and development of accredited qualifications suited for the Fibreboard and Wood sector;
- create 'buy in' with the middle-management teams within the businesses so that they accept the need for the development of a broader, multi-skilled, trained workforce;
- deliver a structured modular training programme which will fit around the ebbs and flows in company output and enable apprentices to implement their knowledge and skills soon after learning has taken place;
- support the business organisations in recruiting apprenticeships at 16+;
- support the 'sign up' of supervisors and managers for the diploma qualifications.

What the project has achieved so far

Three key areas have been fundamental to the project's achievements to date.

Firstly, being able to identify and work with key influencers in the business organisations has been essential. In a traditional workplace culture, where there are barriers to further professional learning, the project team had to take time to understand both the business and the sector. The delivery team from the College spent a considerable amount of time talking to Human Resources and the operating teams at all the sites to get a true picture of their culture, structure and the key influencers. Strong evidence across all sites identified the middle-management teams as the key influencers for this type of project. Their concerns were that any form of additional training and the mentoring of young apprentices would lead to unwelcome job expansion. The key tactic was to create joint planning processes with senior and middle management and Pro Skills. This created the much-needed ownership from middle management and visible commitment from senior management.

Secondly, building a strong working relationship with the sector skills council was vital in supporting the College's entry into the sector and served to confirm the credibility of the College to the business organisations.

Finally, the design of a fully-flexible delivery programme which responds to the needs of the sector, the business organisations, and the skill demands of the existing and future workforce. The design and implementation of a block-structure training programme, delivered across a range of working sites and at times which best suit the needs of the business (not the qualification) has been vital to the success of the programme.

What the project still needs to do

To achieve both the long-term and short-term objectives, the project team still needs to:

- gain full sign-off of the technical certificates by the awarding bodies and upload the delivery units;
- support the business organisations with the recruitment of apprentices;
- incorporate individual learning plans into the recruitment process;
- develop the learner voice and align it to the learner quality assurance strategy and the organisations' quality assurance processes;
- develop tracking systems for the learning process;
- manage relations and expectations with business organisations.

Key learning points

The project team feel that there are several key areas critical to the success of a project working in partnership with employers:

- Develop a real understanding of the business culture, processes and people. All business organisations will operate differently even when in the same sector and it is essential to identify who, what and how decisions are made within each business organisation. Only when you have this can you develop a 'real' working partnership.
- Involve all members of the programme delivery team in the communication and planning of the programme. At least one member of the delivery team should have an active involvement in all meetings with senior and middle managers to develop the strategy.
- Meet the barriers and challenges head on. The overwhelming feeling of unwelcome job expansion needed to be understood and managed in line with company communications and strategy.
- Never underestimate the need to continually work at the development of the relationship with key influencers. Personnel may change, business priorities may change so be fully prepared for these ahead of time.
- Commit to a communication strategy that informs and challenges.